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ABSTRACT

The role of the particle "o.k." in service encounter dialogue is discussed. A service encounter is defined as a situation of interaction between a "posted" server and a second party (a customer) who invokes the server's participation as an operator of a "serving post." It is suggested that approval or acceptance is often only part of what is being conveyed when the term "o.k." is used. In particular, it is argued that this term is attuned to punctuating interactional units within the encounter. The server's use of the term seems to operate as an acknowledgement that it is the server's turn to take some verbal or non-verbal action. The customer's use of the term may indicate intention to release the server from further obligation to provide the requested commodity. It is concluded that the term "o.k." has at least two possible functions: (1) that of signifying approval, acceptance, confirmation; and (2) that of providing a bridge, a linking device between two stages or phases of the encounter. (AM)

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RELEVANCE TO EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Marilyn Merritt's paper is an example of the careful, precise analysis of language use now being carried out by sociolinguists. It shows that "O.K." does not just mean 'yes' in some vague sense, but rather has an explicit function and structure in discourse. Merritt arrives at her analysis by paying attention to the social interactional properties of language use. Educational practitioners should be aware that there is more to language structure than traditional grammar, that children must learn not only how to put sounds, words, and phrases together, but must also become adept at the rules for using such seemingly innocent words and particles as "O.K."

Joel Sherzer, Editor
Working Papers Series

ON THE USE OF "O.K." IN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

Marilyn Merritt

In this paper I would like to do two things: First I would like to report on my observations of some patterns in which "O.K." is used. The patterns given are, of course, not exhaustive. Secondly I would like to suggest an analysis that makes use of interactional concepts. I suggest that the implication is that such social interactional concepts need to be considered in the development of a viable way of talking about language use.

The analysis I am presenting here is based upon naturalistic observations of dialogic speech in one type of social context or situation. This is a context which I identify by the term service encounter.[1] Briefly, by a service encounter I mean the situation of interaction between a "posted" server and a second party (a customer) who invokes the server's participation as an operator of a "serving post". The serving post--in many cases the cash register counter--is typically part of a larger "service area" such as a store or a shop. Thus a buying and selling encounter between a customer and a server is a typical instance of a service encounter.

In looking at what people say in service encounters it has been natural to focus on questions and responses to questions, as these comprise much of what goes on in service encounters. In doing so I came to notice the occurrence of the word "O.K.".

"O.K." was referred to by Dwight Bolinger in 1957 (in his work on Interrogative Structures of American English) as an approbative--defined in the dictionary as an act that is approving or assenting to the propriety of a thing with some degree of pleasure or satisfaction. Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language (1928 edition)

gives under the entry for "O.K.": "Correct; all right--chiefly put or indorsed on documents, bills, etc. to indicate approval." The entry also suggests that the word is probably derived from the Choctaw "Oken," meaning 'it is so and not otherwise'.[2] Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language (1971 edition) makes no mention of the origin of the word. The entry lists its use as an adverb, synonymous with "all right" and "yes", as in the sentence "O.K. Doctor, I'll let you know."; and as a transitive verb, synonymous with "approve", "authorize", and "sanction". Both these definitions corroborate Bolinger's designation.

My observations of the use of "O.K." in service encounters are also largely corroborative. However, a closer look has led me to believe that a sense of approval or acceptance is often only part of what is being conveyed when the term "O.K." is used. In particular, I shall argue that use of the term is attuned to punctuating interactional units within the encounter: move, turn, and stage.

I first noted that "O.K." occurred in a particular position within the service encounter sequence, thereby characterizing what might be thought of as a pattern of usage. This pattern related to the customer's initial request--occurring in the conversational slot I have elsewhere (1976a: 66,70) called the "customer start"--and the server's response or response slot.

The English language provides a number of lexical items with which to express affirmative response: "yes", "yeah", "yeh", "yep", "all right", "O.K.", "fine", "right", and so on. The differential use of these items in different contexts undoubtedly reflects degree of formality. However, at least in service encounters, there are patterns of variation that suggest another kind of distinction. As I have suggested elsewhere (1976a,b) there are at least two major types of "customer starts": requests

for information (as in "Do you sell bathing caps?") and requests for action (as in "Can I have a pack of Marlboros please?"). Correspondingly, there seems to be a dichotomy in the affirmative responses between "yes" items ("yes", "yeah", "yeh", "yep", "Umhmm") and "O.K." items ("all right", "O.K."). In particular, "yes" items seem to operate primarily as affirmative responses to requests for <u>information</u> while "O.K." items seem to operate more as affirmative or "granting" responses to requests for <u>action</u>. Compare, for example, (1) and (2), in which "yes" items occur, with (3), in which the server responds with an "O.K." item:

(1) library

C: Do I reserve a book here?

→ S: Yes

(2) gift shop

C: Do you have lighters?

→ S: Yes. Over on the other side of the showroom.

(3) notions

C: C'n I have two packs of Vantage Green?

→ S: O.K. (turns to get)

Frequently, if not typically, of course these kinds of interchanges occur in sequence, as in (4), (5), and (6):

(4) snack truck

C: Do you have Marlboros?

→ S: Yeah, Hard or soft pack?

C: Soft please.

→ S: O.K. (turns to get)

(5) notions

C: Hi, do you have uh size C flashlight batteries?

→ S: Yes sir.

C: I'll have four please?

S: Do you want the long life or the regular? See the long life doesn't last ten times longer than the regular battery. Usually lasts three times as long. Cheaper in the long run. These're eighty-eight. These-re thirty-five each.

C: Guess I better settle for the short life.

S: How many you want?

C: Four please.

→ S: O.K. (picks four and puts on counter). That's a dollar forty and nine tax, a dollar forty-nine.

(6) photography store

C: Do you stock polycontrast paper?

→ S: Yes we do. What size and quantity do you want?

C: Twenty-five sheets, eight by ten, double weight.

→ S: O.K. (puts box on counter)

It may be that the "yes" items do occasionally occur in the response slot after requests for action (when they are accompanied by appropriate action). For example:

(7) university cafeteria

C: Can I have one large cup of coffee black and one large cup of coffee with cream?

→ S: Um Humm. (starts fixing)

However, I have observed no instances of "O.K." in the response slot to a question of the "Do you have__?: type. Rather, in the slot that is a response to the customer start "O.K." seems to be specialized as a response to a request for action. The actual satisfaction of a request for action, of course, is not a verbal response but the requested action itself (such as getting the pack of cigarettes, preparing the cup of coffee, etc.). This suggests that "O.K." may have some special function as a signal or cue that the requested action is about to take place.

Initially I hypothesized that "O.K." might operate generally as an acknowledgement that it is the speaker's (that is, the person who said "O.K.") turn (or present obligation) to take some action (getting the cigarettes, getting out the paper requested, etc.). In other words the "O.K." might signal approval of the request and intention to act on the request. It seemed, too, that the word "O.K." might have a special role in bridging the transition from a verbal to non-verbal mode of interaction, much as the passing of a baton in a relay race bridges the transition from one person's running the race to a second person's running the race.

I began to notice, however, that the move immediately following the uttering of "O.K." was not always non-verbal. This is illustrated in examples (8), (9), (10), and (11):

(8) savings bank

C: Do you sell government bonds?

S: Yes we do.

C: I'd like one for fifty dollars please.

→ S: O.K. Would you please fill out this application completely sir.

(9) ticket booth, movies

C: Two please (pushing bill through window)

S: Which picture?

C: American Grafitti

→ S: O.K. That's five dollars.

(10) department store, hosiery

C: (approaches S with stocking, hands then to S)

→ S: O.K. hon. That'll be one--

C: (hands bill to S)

S: --out of five.

(11) snack truck

C: (stands at window, S is turned away)

→ S: (S turn to C) O.K. What do you want?

C: Hot dog.

In every case, however, the next move (whether non-verbal or verbal) was made by the same speaker who said "O.K." (in all these examples, the server)--as predicted. Thus I modified my hypothesis to wit:

revised hypothesis

In my materials "O.K." items seem to operate generally as an acknowledgement that it is the speaker's (that is, the person who said "O.K.") turn (or present obligation) to take some action--whether verbal or non-verbal--that is, to make the next move in the interaction. In cases where the next move is a non-verbal act, the "O.K." item can be seen to be doing a kind of "bridging" between the verbal and the non-verbal. It anchors the non-verbal action in what has already gone on verbally, at the same time as it provides an expectation of something to follow.

The two patterns of use that have been looked at so far involve the server's use of the term "O.K." and its relation to the server's providing a requested service. Now let us consider examples in which it is the customer who says "O.K.", as in (12) and (13):

(12) jewelry

(S has just shown C a necklace)

C: Can you show me something else in that price range?

S: Let me see what else I have. (looking down) Here are two other pendants.

→ C: O.K. I'll take these two (pointing).

(13) department store, cosmetics

C: Can I have a bottle//o' the mint?//

S: // What? // What shampoo?

C: The green.

S: Which?

C: The mint protein. Can I also see the conditioner?

S: Which:

C: The cucumber. Can I smell it?

S: Sure. (placing on counter)

→ C: O.K. I'll take both. That'll be charge.

In both cases the customer seems to be not only expressing approval of the requested commodity, but also expressing satisfaction with having examined it. That is, he is expressing his having <u>completed</u> examination and his readiness to take the next move (in these cases to decide whether to take the commodity or not, though in other cases the customer may defer this move pending examination of other commodities).

Now consider (14):

(14) notions

(C has been looking in rear of store at a selection of hair ties.)

C: These're the only ones you have, right?

S: Right

→ C: O.K. Guess not. Thanks just the same.

S: You're welcome.

Here the customer is expressly not approving of the requested commodity, but is satisfied with his examination of it. He then takes the next move to state his decision not to buy. By expressing his satisfaction with his examination of the commodity, he in a sense releases the server from any further obligation to continue to provide the requested commodity.

The use of "O.K." to release the other party from the current obligation occurs also in examples (15), (16), and (17) below. In these examples the requested commodity is not provided by the server but a reason is given. When the customer replies with "O.K." he gives an acceptance of that reason or account.

(15) delicatessen

C: Do you have two dimes and a nickel for a quarter?

S: (rings cash register, opens drawer)
We don't have any dimes left.

→ C: O.K. Thank you.

(16) drug store

C: Excuse me, I'm looking for Phisohex--do you have any?

S: Should be over in aisle three under skin care.

C: I already looked there. You wouldn't have any in stock would you?

S: No. If it's not on the shelf we must be out.

→ C: O.K. Thanks anyway.

(17) university cafeteria

(the complete sequence of which example (7) is a segment)

C: Can I have one large cup of coffee black and one large cup of coffee with cream?

S: Um Humm. (starts fixing)

C: Make that black with sugar.

S: You'll have to put your own sugar in. It's out.

→ C: Oh. O.K. Fine.

In these cases in which "O.K." seems to be used by one participant to release the other participant, the release function can be interpreted as a special case of general or "ordinary" use of "O.K." as tentatively suggested in the "revised hypothesis" above. That is, since the "O.K." speaker thereby obligates himself to take the next necessary move in the encounter, by so obligating himself he necessarily releases the other participant from any current obligation to continue his turn. Example (18) is another example of a "releasing" "O.K.". In this case it is not a commodity that has been requested but rather information as to its whereabouts.

(18) notions

C: Do you have Chanuka cards?

S: Yeah, right back against the wall there. See the sign -- Chanuka cards?

→ C: O.K.

"O.K." may also be used by the server to release the customer--in many cases to express satisfaction with payment, as in (19):

(19) notions

→ S: O.K. That'll be fifty, seventy-five, ninety cents altogether.

COIN

CASH REGISTER

CHANGE

→ S: O.K. Thank you.

Note that in (19) "O.K." occurs twice. In (2) a similar term "all right" occurs in almost the identical pattern"

(20) notions

→ S: All right. That's twenty five and two tax--twenty seven.

SOUND OF MONEY

→ S: All right. Thank you.

The words "O.K." and "all right" seem almost to punctuate the sequence. If they were in some sense punctuating or marking transition, the question arises as to what they would be marking transition between. I propose that the use of "O.K." (and other "O.K." items like "all right") may signal a transition in stages or something like stages (perhaps "phase" is a better word). Elsewhere (1976a) I have suggested that service encounters typically are composed of four different stages: access, selection decision, exchange, and closure. In (19) and (20) "O.K." items are used twice in each sequence: first at the point at which transition is being made from selection decision to exchange, and secondly at the point at which transition is being made from exchange to closure. This suggests that "O.K." does indeed function as a kind of bridging device, as proposed in the "revised hypothesis". However, it does not necessarily perform this function only between verbal and non-verbal phases of the encounter, but rather may occur at other possible transition points as well.

As a result of these observations I offer the following generalization:

Use of the term "O.K." has at least two possible functions:

(1) that of signifying approval, acceptance, confirmation.

(2) that of providing a bridge, a linking device between two stages or phases of the encounter. In these cases, use of the term "O.K." seems to signify that the speaker suggests the termination of the phase that has just preceded and agrees to take the initiative in continuing with the next phase (or be satisfied with termination (as in (15) through (18)).

There are cases in which only the first, more traditionally assigned function seems to be operating, as in example (21):

(21) notions (midway through the encounter)

C: Yeah, but I wantta get//

S: Yeah

C: I wantta get colors--

→ S: Yeah you can mix the papers. O.K. Whatever you wantta do.

But very frequently, as has been shown, both functions seem to be operating.[3] Consider the many occurrences of "O.K." in the following service encounter (which is the entire sequence of which (21) is a part):

(22) notions

S: Whattaya lookin' for Miss? COUGH ((maybe)) I can help you?

C: Uh Yeah. Christmas wrapping paper.

S: All right. We'll show you. CASH REGISTER SLAM Here you are. Right around here Miss, look.

C: Oh. O.K.

S: Around here.

C: Oh I see.

S: Here's this ((inaudible)) and then we got uh different boxes here.

C: ((You don't carry)) the individual sheets.

S: All right.

C: Hmm.

S: And if you don't see anything individual we'll sell these rolls, we'll break // a box for you.

C: Oh really?

S: We'll sell you one--you know what I mean. In other words this is a dollar and a quarter for three, forty-five cents for one. Of course this is Christmas wrap individual.

C: Yeah. O.K. Good.

S: You can buy any of these individually. In other words like--like one of these rolls you can have//

C: Un Hunh.

S: for forty-five cents a roll.

C: O.K. Thank you.

(S goes back to serving post; C looks at paper)

S: You can break any of those boxes O.K. Just take one roll out you want it.

C: ((O.K.))

(S attends to other customer, a few minutes elapse)

C: You don't have any <u>yarn</u> ribbon do you?

RING

S: Yarn ribbon?

C: Unh Hunh.

S: No. No yarn ribbon. Just uh--I forget--for wrapping packages?

C: Uhn Hunh.

S: No--we have what you see over here (walking away)

C: O.K.

(a few seconds pass)

C: Is it ever possible to mix these tt-

S: Yeah. You can do whatever you want. You wantta-- you can mix-em--whatever you wantta do.

C: The problem being that if I get one of these little boxes of bows I gotta make'em match (huh huh) same ((amount of)) paper.

S: Well--we're not breaking up the bows you know. 'Nother words you wantta take--a package of bows?

C: Yeah. But I wantta get//

S: Yeah.

C: I wantta get colors--

S: Yeah you can mix the papers. O.K. Whatever you wantta do.

(several minutes go by, then C approaches the serving post)

C: (putting selections on counter) Two rolls.

S: All right. Ninety and forty-nine is//

C: Oh and I need some hair spray too.

((inaudible few seconds))

C: I'll come down and look. Go ahead and take his. (referring to next customer)

(after a few minutes)

S: O.K. Anything else?

C: That's all. Thank you.

S: ((inaudible))

C: Three o seven, three ten, three twenty-five. I'll put it in a bag for you.

RATTLING

S: O.K. Thank you.

The notion that discourse and the significance of words as used should be studied within an interactional framework (utilizing interactional concepts such as move, turn, and stage (or phase)) has been suggested by Erving Goffman (1964, 1971), William Labov (1972), and others. The findings presented here about the use of "O.K." in service encounters corroborate this notion, and hopefully contribute to a general understanding of the use of the word "O.K.". [4]

Footnotes

1. The notion of a service encounter is developed more fully in Merritt 1976a, chapters 1 and 3. See chapter 4 or Merritt 1976b for a discussion of service encounter as it relates to the notions of discourse and speech event generally. Chapter 2 of Merritt 1976a describes in detail the corpus from which the examples in this paper are drawn.

2. This suggestion is not supported by the well-known papers of Allen Walker Read (1963a,b) on the origin of "O.K.". Read argues that "O.K." began as a linguistically "faddish" way of abbreviating "all correct" (oll korrect = "O.K.") in the late 1830s, and was later "boosted" by its association with the phrase "Old Kinderhood" used in the political campaigns of 1840. Another researcher, Woodford Heflin (1962), argued against such an etymology of the word. The origin of "O.K." is apparently not clearly resolved.

Though I shall not be concerned with word origin in this paper, it is interesting that the properties that have obscured the origin of "O.K." are the very ones that make it interesting in terms of language use:

> "...It has been urged that "O.K." was used in such a loose sense that it must have stood for something else besides "all correct". But slang expressions are notoriously loose, and it should not be expected that either "O.K." or all correct would be used in a strict sense. ..." (Read, 1963a, 13-14).

3. This raises, of course, the possibility of ambiguity of function for any given occurrence. In talking with servers I have been told that in some service encounters there can be, indeed, ambiguity from this source. For example, one server, who sold jewelry and had to take stock out of a

display case in order to show it to a customer, told me that when she had displayed an item and the customer said "O.K." it was not always clear whether the customer meant "O.K." (gloss: 'Yes I'll take that one') or "O.K." (gloss: 'I'm finished looking at it (show me the next one)'). In a much more serious vein, a recent airline disaster (May 1977) has been linked to the possible misunderstanding by one pilot of "O.K." to mean "O.K. (gloss: 'confirmed; approved; go ahead and take off') rather than the intended "O.K." (gloss: 'that's all for now; I'll get back to you (when there is more information (when you're cleared for take-off)').

This area of ambiguity is one that I hope to explore further in future research.

4. This paper was presented to the Fifth Annual Conference on New Ways of Analyzing Variation. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., October, 1976. I am grateful to Dwight Bolinger and William Labov for useful comments.

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